A Free Press: From Jefferson to Reagan

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A free press is "one of this country's major strengths. And the right to protect his source of information is fundamental to a newsman in meeting his full responsibilities to the public he serves." That statement wasn't made by a liberal judge, an ACLU lawyer or a newspaper publisher. It was issued recently by the Governor of the State of California, Ronald Reagan, on signing an amendment to that state's "shield law" which tightened the protections which newsmen have from investigatory bodies which feel they must have the fruits of a newsman's labors in order to complete their investigations.

We don't quote the governor's words in some kind of perverse glee, but rather because we think they make absolute sense in a free society and because there seems, just about now, to be some doubt about the values and the realities which support and give force to those words.

All grand designs for the building of a society are fraught with frail seams which are strained and sometimes broken by future realities. One day's absolutes are another day's anachronisms. But, the founders of this republic put their hands on something which is both valuable and enduring. That was the idea that people who had very little notion of what was going on around them or being done to them, for them or in their name had little capacity to govern themselves . . . and consequently, little reason to call themselves free.

The question then becomes: How does a citizen inform himself? In the days of the founders, it was difficult. Travel was hard and, by today's standards, communication was crude. Now, people are drenched in news, shills, bills, pleas for help and outrageous drivel coming at them from all quarters. Institutions are monumental and problems are overwhelmingly complex. Slick messages designed to manipulate and to deceive abound. In that context, the governor's words about a newsman meeting his full responsibilities take on a rich and a full meaning in terms of the autonomy of a free citizen struggling against great odds to preserve a free society.

Or, to put the question in contemporary terms: What information is one to trust? Does your information come from admittedly fallible human beings, who nevertheless try to hew to a devotion to the truth, or does it come down a greased chute designed to bend men's minds for profit or for power? Jefferson's answer given years ago is good enough for us. He said, "The basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right . . . Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

To have the spirit of Thomas Jefferson live today in Gov. Reagan is solace enough to send us hopefully into another new year.